Toward the 100th anniversary of 1915

April 24, 2015, is a symbolic day for Armenians around the world, because it marks the centenary of the day on which hundreds of Armenian community leaders in İstanbul were deported and mostly executed. April 24, 2014, meanwhile, was an historic date for Turkey because for the first time the Turkish government presented its 'condolences' to Armenian descendants of the 1915 victims for their 'suffering' during a 'difficult period'

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Although in his message last year President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan never used the term "genocide," which Turkey absolutely denies as part of its state policy, and his actions could be viewed as opportunistic, it can still be considered an historic message, one which has come as a result of changing social dynamics in Turkey and international pressure.

In Turkey, the history of commemorations of 1915 is very short. The extreme silence, even, among intellectuals and academics in the country regarding this issue began to be broken at the beginning of 2000 and gained prominence with the assassination of Turkish-Armenian journalist Hrant Dink in 2007. Three years after Dink's murder, a group of Turkish and Armenian intellectuals began to gather at Taksim Square each year in order to express their sadness over the sufferings that occurred almost a century ago.

With time, taboos in Turkey's public arena have to an extent been overcome; those who want to refer to the events as "genocide" may face reactions from nationalist circles, but they are freer to do so compared with the past. Article 301 of the Turkish Penal Code (TCK) -- under which Dink was prosecuted -- still exists, but is now seldom applied, with prosecutions never reaching court. Debate in the media continues, as does academic research.

For the last few years, a large volume of academic research has been completed on the Armenian issue in Turkey. According to data from the Higher Education Board (YÖK), most of the academic work on this issue reflects Turkey's official position on the massacres. Moreover, according to a report published in the bilingual Turkish-Armenian weekly Agos, academics working on dissertations about the Armenian Genocide are under the close scrutiny of the Turkish Historical Society (TTK). On the other hand, there are civil society organizations and independent researchers that offer independent research on the issue. In particular, those using the oral history method have brought personal narratives to light. These have had positive effects on the public in terms of widening the historical facts, opening a door for confrontation with the past and going behind the headlines of state politics.

In this sense, the "Sounds of Silence" series of books from the Hrant Dink Foundation's oral history project,

The Armenian issue gained prominence with the assassination of Turkish-Armenian journalist Hrant Dink.
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PHOTO: ZAMAN, SELAHATTİN ŞEVİ

which are based on interviews with the Armenians of Turkey and focus on their personal narratives in a relation with the country's macrohistory, are one of the best examples of unofficial history-telling in Turkey. The third book of the series focuses on the Armenians of Ankara and continues to tell the unspoken history of the Armenians who have words to say.

Oral history projects are important, since personal narratives make their owners more than statistics; they touch people in a more personal and intimate way and make them identify with the pain of the "other." Old and official narratives seem weak and unconvincing when placed alongside real people's histories. By means of such works of research, those whose lives were directly affected by 1915 finally have authority over their own experiences; when people tell their own stories, history is written from the bottom up.

ARMENIANS OF ANKARA: DOUBLE SILENCE AT THE CENTER OF BUREAUCRACY

After two previous books -- titled "Sounds of Silence: Armenians of Turkey Speak" (Sessizliğin Sesi: Türkiyeli Ermeniler Konuşuyor) and "Sounds of Silence II: Armenians of Diyarbakır Speak" (Sessizliğin Sesi II: Diyarbakırlı Ermeniler Konuşuyor) -- this third book -- "Sounds of Silence III: Armenians of Ankara Speak" (Sessizliğin Sesi II: Ankaralı Ermeniler Konuşuyor) -- also focuses on Armenians, but this time on those who are living in modern Turkey's capital. The Hrant Dink Foundation's books are the first oral history books that focus on the Armenians of today's Turkey, silenced for years for a variety of reasons.

First of all, they were silenced because of the pressure of the traditional state approach in Turkey, which has been based on ignorance and denial. Second, the genocide recognition campaign, which mainly (and naturally) focused on the pain of a lost nation, unfortunately neglected the presence of the ordinary lives left behind. So, the second or third generation of survivors of the genocide who continue to live in Turkey have not had the chance to talk about their own stories or did not feel brave enough to do so. The assassination of Hrant Dink broke the spiral of silence in this sense and the Armenians of Turkey began to talk about their past and their experiences today.

This third book, again edited by journalist Ferda Balancar, comprises 10 interviews with Armenians of Ankara and also includes a foreword by Raymond H. Kévorkian. Although (and paradoxically) Ankara has two different histories -- one goes back to the Hittite

Empire and the other starts with the establishment of the Republic in Turkey, according to the top-down history of official ideology -- Kévorkian quoted another history of Ankara:

> *On the eve of World War I, half of the Armenian population of 28,858 in the Ankara sanjak, lived in the city of Ankara, the administrative center of the province. The distinguishing feature of the Ankara community was the high percentage of Catholics; according to the 1914 census, 70 percent of an Armenian population of 11,246 in the city was Catholic. Another characteristic of the community was that they spoke Turkish and also wrote Turkish, albeit using the Armenian alphabet. Armenians had many schools in Ankara and in terms of the educational level they had very high standards (5).*

Today it is very hard to find traces of this population and the things that they left behind. On the other hand, today, the prominent difference between the Armenians of Ankara and those of elsewhere in Turkey is their silence or self-control, developed as a result of living in the Turkish nation's bureaucratic heart.

THE DOMINANT MOOD AMONG THE ARMENIANS OF ANKARA, HOWEVER, IS THEIR SILENCE, AND THEIR TENDENCY TO KEEP A LOW PROFILE

1915 IN ANKARA

By September 1915, Kévorkian says, "the Armenians of Ankara -- women, children and the elderly, Apostolic or Catholic -- were taken out of their houses, which were sealed earlier by the police. The crowd, thousands in number, was brought together in the train station outside the city. They stayed there for at least for 25 days. This time period was enough for their possessions to be seized and to persuade the most attractive young women to convert to Islam and marry a Muslim. Those who accepted the offer were allowed to go back to the city; those who did not were eventually sent to Eskişehir and Konya, later joining the deportation line going to Syria" (11).

In "The Sound of Silence III: Ankara's Armenian Speak," Kévorkian states in the foreword, "A large proportion of the narratives on the following pages belong most probably to the members of such families, who share their unique experiences" (15).

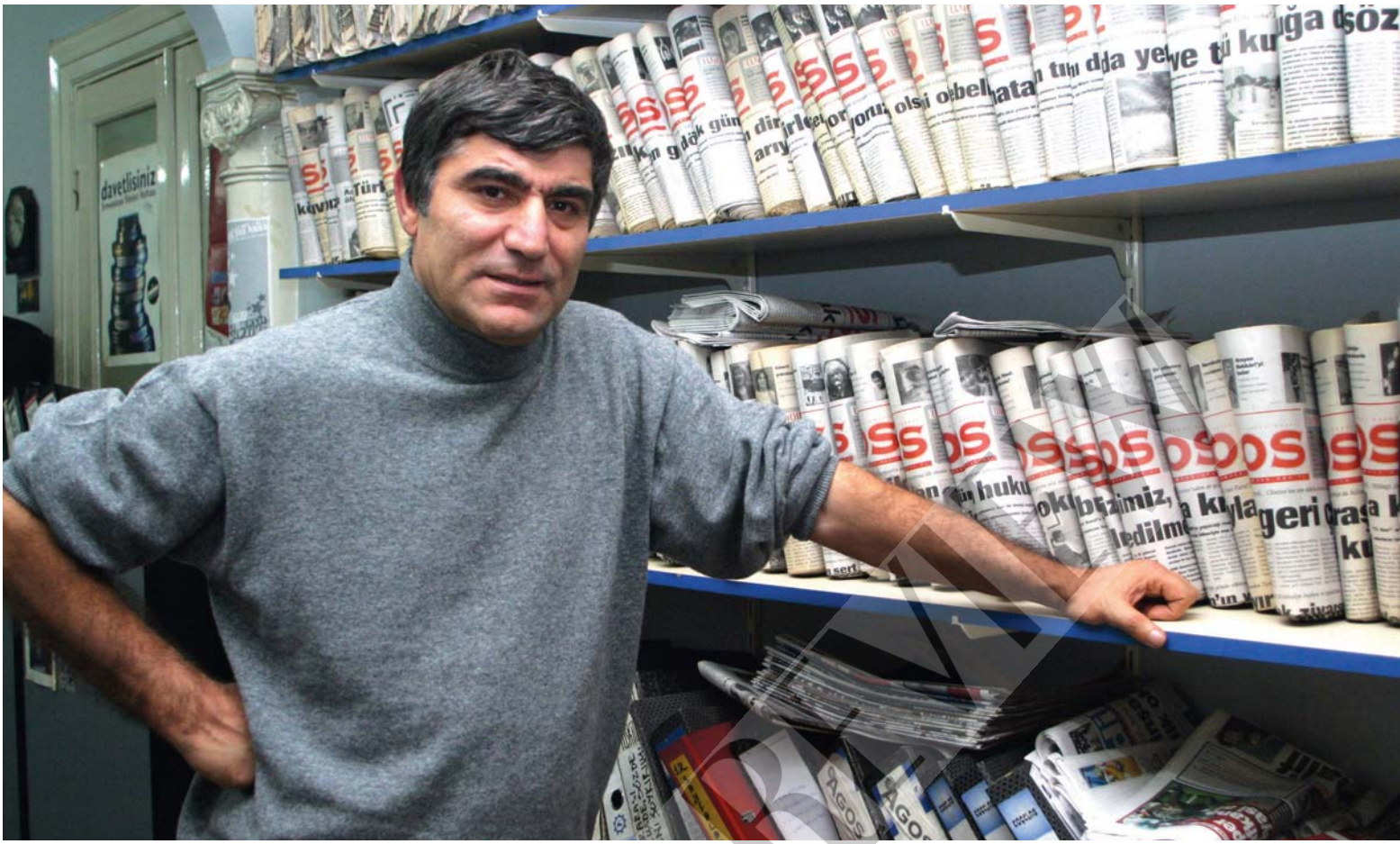
AFTER 1915 IN ANKARA

"If you are an Armenian you can only find a very restricted place in the system" (19) is a statement proven by experience and almost taken for granted by most Armenians living in Turkey. In particular, the state bureaucracy had almost no space for the country's non-Turkish and non-Muslim citizens. The first Armenian civil servant interviewee states that becoming a civil servant was not a smooth process:

> *I entered the municipality service as a laborer. Armenians could not become civil servants until 1963. With a law that was passed in 1963, Armenians began to become civil servants in technical services, as engineers for instance. After Sept. 12, laborers will do their work and those who have desk jobs will become civil servants. And since I have no idea to how to operate a digger, I preferred to be a civil servant, but that is also where the difficulties began: My salary was cut in half. I was appointed as a civil servant translator. I worked at the department of general administrative services, so I am the first Armenian to be appointed to such a position (31).*

The dominant mood among the Armenians of Ankara, however, is their silence, and their tendency to keep a low profile in order to avoid the possible negative reactions of being an Armenian and Christian in a Turkish- and Muslim-dominated society is also prominent. One of the interviewers described the situation thus: "I did not face any serious difficulty for being Armenian, but we were always timid and cautious. People sometimes used to make remarks in the neighborhood; it used to annoy me a bit, but I used to laugh it off. There were a few times when I was hurt by comments, and I cried" (41).

This timid mood has a direct effect on their use of the Armenian language. Most Armenians in Ankara have Turkish names and have lost their ability to speak their mother tongue. One reason for this is the Catholic Armenian custom, that uses Turkish with the Armenian alphabet, but another reason is the limited potential of the use of the language. As one of the interviewees states: "There are only a handful of Armenians here. They are not



Dink was gunned down outside the office of his newspaper, Agos.
PHOTO: ZAMAN, İBRAHİM DOĞAN

wealthy either, and have no social influence. So they have chosen to live without revealing themselves, to live in a state of secrecy" (43). Regarding the use of language, the quotes from two different interviewers below explain the past and current situation of the Armenians of Ankara. One says: "I don't speak Armenian, but no one in Ankara can speak Armenian anyway. My grandmother and aunt used to correspond in Turkish written in Armenian letters" (33). "I learned Armenian from my children who went to Armenian schools" (120), said another .

On the language issue and in terms of Armenian identity, living in Ankara and in İstanbul always appears a matter of comparison for the interviewers: "My mother's cousins live in İstanbul. We see each other often. Their children can read and write Armenian because they attend Armenian schools. The possibility of me attending an Armenian school in İstanbul was never even discussed when I was small" (52), states a young Armenian, while saying that he feels the lack of Armenian in his life now. Another says: "Ankara is not like İstanbul. Because İstanbul has always been a very cosmopolitan place, it has been easy to protect your identity as an Armenian. Ankara is not like that" (43).

Especially for interviewees born in Ankara but who later lived in İstanbul, the difference between Ankara and İstanbul is very clear. Most of these interviewees state that practices such as going to church, celebrating religious holidays, learning Armenian and even the history of 1915 entered in their lives once they moved to İstanbul. So while İstanbul emerges as a "totally different" place in which they reestablish their collective identities and memories, Ankara refers to limitations and loneliness. One interviewee from Ankara explains that situation as follows: "When I was a child, we did not go to church every Sunday. We went at Christmas and Easter. In fact, they used to ridicule us, calling us 'Easter Christians'" (50).

The Armenians of Ankara are certainly not homogeneous. In particular with regard to religion, they are divided into different groups such as Eastern Orthodox, Catholics, Protestants and Islamized Armenians. The commonalities of this heterogeneous community are Turkey as a homeland and Turkish as the language used in their daily lives. These two are very important elements of their identities. An Armenian lady who was born in Ankara and is now living in Austria now describes this situation as follows:

> *I have always said this: I am Armenian but I am an Armenian from Turkey. I do not come from anywhere else. My ancestors, my grandfathers, were from Kayseri, Maraş and Sivas. I have the right to live here as much as anyone who says, 'I am a Turk, I am a Muslim.' I love this country a lot. I follow everything about it. Although I have lived in Austria since 1979, I am*

Images from 'Sessizliğin Sesi II: Diyarbakırlı Ermeniler Konuşuyor,' in which HDV spoke to Armenians from Diyarbakır. PHOTO: ZAMAN

interested in everything about Turkey. My four granddaughters, especially the eldest, write beautiful Turkish and compose poems (67).

In this sense, meeting with the Armenian diaspora and Europe is another dimension of their stories. "As Turkish Armenians, we are in a strange position, as we live this life […] I once went to Jerusalem for a medical congress. I visited the Armenian neighborhood there. After visiting the church, I entered a shop that sold handmade souvenirs. The shopkeeper gave me the cold shoulder when I said I was an Armenian from Turkey. The people in the diaspora adopt a cold stance against Armenians from Turkey" (42), says one of the interviewees.

Another describes the situation as follows: "But once you go to Europe, it makes no difference whether you are Protestant or Catholic. They see us as Turks, as Muslims. They are particularly prejudiced; you cannot convince anyone you are Christian" (77).

HRANT DINK

For the Armenians of Ankara, Jan. 19, 2007, is as significant a date as 1915. Dink's murder marked a turning point in their personal lives and represents both hope and despair. The people who came together at Dink's funeral made them feel not alone but also make them recollect the killings of 1915. One of the interviewees asks, "Where were these people before Hrant Dink was killed?" while another says: "There is no reason to have fear any more [...] since Armenians are so few in Turkey now and we no longer considered a threat" (111).

Dink's assassination appears to be a date for the Armenians of Ankara that marks the beginning of a significant process in which they reconstruct their collective identity and memory. The path that Dink opened in Turkey for Armenians refers to a start in their lives after which it is no longer possible for them to remain silent. This is not a destructive path, on the contrary, it is a way for them to reconstruct their identities in relation to a sense of belonging to Turkey as Armenians citizens of the country, and to have the courage to do so. As Özgür Bal stated in his afterword: "Thus, the presence, ideas, arguments and achievements of Hrant Dink, and also his absence, his assassination and the reaction against his murder, become part of this reconstruction process" (159).